

**Tuesday 26 April 2016**  
**Friends of the Musicians Chapel**

The Christian faith has at its heart the concept of memory. It is something which the Church articulates in liturgy and prayer and in its Calendar of Holy Days. We celebrate the faith often by commemorating the saints.

Tonight's holy men and women are the saints of the Musicians Chapel – people who have been blessed with gifts from God and used those gifts as talents, not to be buried in the ground but to be invested in the hearts and minds of other people, young and old alike, to build on God's divine work of creativity with little echoes of the divine in their own human creativity.

And we're here commemorating them and giving thanks to God for them by singing what is often described as that most Anglican of services: Choral Evensong.

The pianist Stephen Hough described Choral Evensong on his blog as the liturgical expression of Christ's 'Noli me tangere': do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to the Father'. And that's an interesting comment about Evensong coming, as it does, from a good Roman Catholic.

He says, 'Most religious celebrations gather us around a table of some sort. They hand us a book, or a plate, or speak a word demanding a response. They want to 'touch' us. Choral Evensong ... reminds us that thresholds can be powerful places of contemplation; and that leaving someone alone with their thoughts is not always denying them hospitality or welcome.'

That's not a bad image for us as we, God's faithful people, contemplate, in awe and wonder, the power of the divine majesty – conscious that our exchanges with God can't always be as close up and personal as we might like, not least because, to presume that they will always be like that, is to run the risk of feeling let down by God and of consequent disappointment that our encounters with God are rare and brief but all the more profound and affecting for that.

Of course, Evensong has its detractors (partly because it is so undemanding of its worshippers) and I'm reminded of John Betjeman in his verse autobiography, 'Summoned by Bells', in which he recalls a bicycle journey through the lanes of Cornwall, with his one-inch map, chancing upon St Ervan and its priest 'in their small hollow deep in sycamores'. The priest sees young Betjeman by the churchyard gate: 'Better come in. It's time for Evensong.' Which Betjeman describes as being said 'rapidly among discoloured walls, impatient of my diffident response.' Tea in the Rectory

follows where the Rector talks of poetry and Cornish saints and of his apiary and the cow he keeps. Sounds like a wonderful life! Betjeman takes up the story:

'He asked me which church service I liked best –  
I told him Evensong...“And I suppose  
You think religion's mostly singing hymns  
And feeling warm and comfortable inside?”  
And he was right: most certainly I did.'

Against the backdrop of our anxieties about declining church attendance, perhaps we're not honest enough about what we like and what makes us tick – about what is in that room into which Jesus told us to go and shut the door and be still and know that God is God. So, I'm grateful to that Roman Catholic pianist for giving me permission to love this service.

I remember a fellow precentor in another cathedral telling a musical conference that he reckoned that Evensong should be prescribed on the NHS. I remember a judge in my previous cathedral who came to Evensong straight from the bench because he couldn't go home until the tension in his muscles and the anxiety in his brain had been released by centuries of choral music offered honestly and sincerely to God. I remember a note in a pew of a great northern cathedral describing Evensong being as if you were dropping in on a conversation already in progress – a conversation between God and his people which began long before you were born and which will continue long after you are dead. Now there's a thought. A liturgy strong and confident outlasting me.

Now, of course, our worship of God does not revolve around Choral Evensong. But it's a thread in the great tapestry of Christian devotion: a strong thread, a lengthy thread, and – perhaps you'll permit me to suggest – a golden thread. For the worshipper, it is undemanding and that may be no bad thing in what is otherwise a very demanding world. But, at the same time, it is only one language amongst many; one conversation amongst many; one mood amongst many; one line of thought amongst many; one prayer amongst many.

But Stephen Hough goes on, 'It is a service into which all can stumble without censure – a rambling old house where everyone can find some corner to sit and think, to listen with half-attention, trailing a few absentminded fingers of faith or doubt in its passing stream.'

If Stephen Hough is right, then Evensong says something about what our churches should be: places into which all can stumble without censure,

where everyone can find some corner to sit and think. And, if they do so, they might look up and see people like us, worshipping God by making music, our faces shining and our hearts burning within us because our precious encounters with God in Christ have changed us, for the better – and they too might step gently but confidently into the circle of faith and our circle of faith will be all the better for that.

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